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ABSTRACT

Peer counseling in high schools provides a developmental growth opportunity for adolescents as well as a valuable outreach service for the Guidance Office. Through intensive small group experience and training, selected students gain insight into their own ideas, needs, and values. They also learn more effective interpersonal and decision making skills. As psychological education, an effective peer counseling program provides a variety of conditions under which adolescents may successfully complete the transition to responsible and satisfying adulthood. Adolescents receive guidance in defining themselves, develop consciousness awareness of conflicting demands, receive training and practice in responsible behavior, set and obtain realistic and desirable goals, assume responsibility for their own behavior and live constructively with the consequences, and develop security about their ability to handle new problems. This paper presents a detailed description of one, two-phased peer counseling program: skills training and application of skills. The entire program is then viewed developmentally as it considers how peer counseling furthers the psychological and maturational growth needs of high school students. (Author)

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Peer Counseling: Academic Credit for Helping Others

Leslie S. Kaplan

With peer counseling, the "revitalizing" paraprofessional movement of the late 1960's meets proactive psychological education of the 1970's. As used in high schools, these paraprofessionals are adolescents selected, trained, and given responsibility for performing an outreach service of the Guidance Office. As psychological education, peer counseling is a process in which students offer listening, support, clarification, and alternatives, along with other verbal and nonverbal communication, to self-referred students. Initially designed as a preventive education option for adolescent drug users, peer counseling has matured into a developmental growth experience. Students gain insight into their own ideas, needs, and values as well as learn more effective interpersonal skills as they interact meaningfully and responsibly with fellow students in a small group environment.

The peer counseling program capitalizes on adolescents' natural use of their contemporaries as a transitional reference group between childhood's emotional dependence on parents and their own adult autonomy. High school students usually go to one another for comfort, understanding, and suggestions. In the peer counseling program, students learn active listening and responding, strategies for problem solving without giving advice, and small group facilitation skills. If, as Powell (1971) notes, adolescents achieve emotional maturity by assuming responsibility, earning recognition for a completed task, developing social skills, and gaining peer and adult acceptance, an

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effective peer counseling program may contribute to this end.

If peer counseling contributes to adolescent emotional maturity, what are the components of an effective peer counseling opportunity and how do these activities help young people make a successful transition to adulthood. The following sections more fully address these issues.

A Peer Counseling Program in Two Phases

At Menchville High School, Newport News, Virginia, the peer counseling program has two phases. Phase I involves a training group of ten students and two adult counselors acting as co-facilitators. The training group meets daily furing one class period for one semester and focuses upon developing a climate of caring, trust, empathy, honesty, and respect in which personal growth may occur. The interpersonal dynamics of the emerging group and the members' feelings become the content of the discussion and the vehicle for further group interaction. Peer counselors learn how to become sensitive to nonverbal communication as well as to identify and reflect verbal content and feeling. Facilitators include many values clarification activities to assist the peer counselors in defining and openly discussing their own priorities. Feedback exercises are also used to identify congruence between what members are saying and how they appear to behave. The students learn the stages of group development and practice appropriate leadership interventions for each plateau as their own group evolves toward the working stage.

In addition, each peer counselor maintains a journal to help integrate his or her personal experiences in the class. The trainees then have opportunities to lead the group: they select, try out, and "process" self-clarifying activities with their fellow trainees. After nine to 12 weeks of training, the peers submit audio tapes which they and the adult facilitators agree demonstrate their individual effectiveness in listening, responding, and problem solving. At this point, the peer counselors are ready to facilitate groups of other high school students.

Phase II of the peer counseling program consists of applying the training through peer counselor-led RAP (Relating and Associating with People) groups composed of fellow students who were not trained as facilitators. Phase II includes composing the RAP groups, planning and leading the weekly RAP sessions, and engaging in regular feedback and evaluation activities.

A Personal Problem Checklist completed by every Menchville student during a September group guidance meeting identifies potential RAP members. Prospective members who indicated loneliness, difficulty in decision making, uncertainty about what's important to them, and a sense that no one understands them are invited by the peer counselor co-facilitators to a 15 minute pregroup interview. Teachers and other students also make referrals of potential members to the group leaders. During the interviews, the peer co-facilitators explain RAP's activities, norms, and goals and invite the student to join. New members then complete informal "contracts" restating the attendance, confidentiality, and listening norms and checking those "relating and associating"

skills and awarenesses each wishes to develop in the group setting. With some expectations clarified and new members' personal commitment to participate, the RAP group begins to meet once a week for 10 weeks during an activity period.

The RAP leaders plan group activities to help members develop trust, define their priorities, talk openly about topics of personal concern, and listen caringly to each other. During the sessions, the peer counselors initiate activities, reflect and help members clarify their comments, and link members' responses so all may comfortably participate in the group process. A post-group evaluation and interview with each member helps determine how well each members' expectations and goals were met.

In addition, peer counselors engage in a structured co-facilitator dialogue after each RAP meeting to assess the proceedings and to give specific feedback to each other on their behavior in the group. The dialogue includes expectations and actual findings about the co-facilitator, behaviors and responses of the other each found most and least helpful in the group, and performance suggestions for the next session. Co-facilitator dialogues, open discussion of RAP difficulties and successes, suggestions to resolve group problems, and planning appropriate activities for the next RAP session occur in the daily peer counseling class. The original training group continues to meet as a resource and support group for the RAP leaders with the adult counselor present daily.

Informal findings generally support the effectiveness of Menchville's Phase I and II groups. A small study (Forrester, 1978) of the peer counselors themselves in Phase I groups using the Tennessee Self Concept Scale (Fitts, 1965) as a pre=post measure over 18 weeks found little significant gain in the self concept of peer counselors but did find significance at the 5% level in the Distribution scores. This suggests that peer counselors may become more definite and certain in their views of themselves than do a comparable group of high school students at Menchville enrolled in a traditional introductory psychology class. Forrester poses the possibility that peer counselors may develop a normal, healthy openness and capacity for self-criticism. These are important characteristics in personal growth.

A questionnaire administered to 34 RAP members after six sessions found a substantial majority of members described RAP as a friendly, caring, honest place where they could open up, express their feelings, and learn more about themselves and others. Eighty percent learned something about themselves. Seventy-nine percent expressed feeling more comfortable speaking to a group and learned how to understand that others were really meaning. Eighty-eight percent stated they would join another RAP group if asked; twelve percent would not join. Several members noted that parents or teachers had commented favorable upon their improved attitude and cooperative behavior since joining RAP but this number was not significant. The problems expressed about RAP involved scheduling conflicts which hindered consistent attendance in the group.

Six Ways Peer Counseling May Help Adolescents Make the Transition to Responsible and Satisfying Adulthood

Hurlock (1973) spells out several difficulties adolescents face when trying to make a successful transition to responsible and satisfying adulthood. By converting these difficulties into opportunities for affective education, a peer counseling program may strongly contribute to this end.

1. Give adolescents guidance in defining themselves.

By experiencing trust in the group, learning verbal and nonverbal communication and responding skills, using decision making strategies, and participating in guided self-exploration activities during Phase I training, peer counselors develop a fuller understanding of their own values. When these PC's lead RAP groups, they refine their own skills and aid the RAP members to learn more effective communication, to define themselves, and to make effective personal decisions.

2. Develop awareness of ambivalence and conflicting demands.

People sometimes experience conflicting emotions about a given event but may not consciously recognize this dichotomy. Instead of deliberate awareness of their competing tensions, many individuals may behave in anxious, confused, and uncertain ways. For instance, a student may feel both love and anger toward parents who are divorcing and forcing the child to choose between them. Yet positive growth includes accepting personal change and the ability to be inconsistent (Rogers, 1961).

Acknowledging this, Phase I training includes helping the peer counselors become consciously aware of their own and others' ambivalences. Adult facilitators actively identify and reflect mixed feelings in the trainees personal disclosures. The group discusses how each can feel affection, anger, and confusion toward the same person and often use role playing exercises to directly focus on others' ambivalences.

3. Train adolescents for responsible behavior

Adolescents need opportunities to gradually assume realistic responsibilities. In preparation, they require hlep in defining clear behavioral guidelines and experiences to build the appropriate skills so they might achieve success when they do take on the new responsibility. In the Phase I groups, the responsibilities increase as the trainee demonstrates mastery of the tasks which compose the mature role. Simultaneously training peer counselors in active communication skills, self-defining and problem solving skills while gradually assinging increasingly difficult tasks helps the adolescents feel more secure about their own abilities to handle both familiar and new situations.

4. Set clear, realistic expectations and desirable, obtainable goals for adolescents and let them achieve these goals.

Throughout the program, Phase I peer counselors set and evaluate personal and group goals according to the following criteria: clear, desirable, obtainable, and by what benchmark the goal will be defined as "reached." Progress toward these goals is reviewed at regular intervals as peer counselors state

their own assessment and receive feedback from the group as to how well the others see the goals attained. A similar activity is part of the pregroup and postgroup RAP interviews so members may likewise set and assess their progress toward personally desired ends. Co-facilitator dialogues and frequent role playing of new upcoming situations further assist peer counselors meet their performance objectives. In these ways, the adolescents know where they are, where they are going, and how to get there.

5. Give adolescents the opportunity to assume responsibility for their own behavior and live with the consequences.

Frequent and specific feedback sessions are a vital, ongoing part of the peer counseling program. These are evaluative and supportive means to helpt peer counselors set performance goals and refine their communication skills. As the individual and the group determine by active discussion of specific behaviors that a goal has been reached, new goals are set. The co-facilitator dialogues and postgroup interviews also aid peer counselors to assume responsibility for their own behavior and make constructive use of the consequences.

6. Help adolescents develop security about their ability to handle new problems.

As a result of the skill building, deciding on clear expectations for outcome behaviors, identifying possible strategies for achieving the desired ends, continual evaluations, and

opportunities to put everything into practice with ongoing feedback, peer counselors at Menchville express their confidence in their abilities to handle new problems. At times, this confidence takes the forms of more active self-disclosure by peer counselors in their training group and more facilitation of these comments by the other peer counselors rather than by the adult leaders. Others report changes in behaviors with their teachers, parents, and friends, increased self-awareness in identifying personal ambivalences, and vigorous use of self-facilitation and problem solving in their own lives. RAP members express similar willingness to understand and solve their problems, feeling less alone or strange, and readiness to openly explore their emotions with trusted peers. One member commented after her final RAP session, " am alot like everyone else but still different."

Conclusions

Adolescents often experience difficulty making the transition to responsible and satisfying emotional maturity. With guidance in self-definition, an awareness of conflicting internal demands, training and opportunities for practicing responsible behavior, and actual successes in solving personal problems as well as helping others do the same, adolescents may develop a feeling of security about their ability to handle new situations. An effective high school peer counseling program may turn normal

adolescent obstacles into growth opportunities as it simultaneously provides a valuable outreach service to the Guidance Office.

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Menchville High School

Guidance and Counseling Center

Peer Counseling Program

Purpose:

The purpose of the peer counseling program is to provide the opportunity for selected high school students to learn interpersonal communications skills, to become aware of personal communication styles, and to become familiar with the dynamics of the helping relationship.

Rationale of the course:

There is a natural tendency for students to rely on their peers for support. Peer counseling provides an opportunity for students to help other students in the form of small, supportive groups. In Phase I of the training, approximately 10 students will learn relating and associating skills, and in Phase II students may qualify to facilitate small groups.

Goals:
1. To provide a trusting atmosphere suitable for participation and group cohesion.
2. To have open channels of communication.
3. To encourage meaningful relationships among participants.
4. To provide the opportunity for participants to recognize strengths and weaknesses.
5. To enhance development of self identity by reinforcing strengths and helping build confidence.
6. To introduce participants to various communications skills.

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Course directions:

1. The ability to recognize certain life values and understand how they effect behavior.
2. Understanding of oneself in relation to the group.
3. Improve communications skills.
4. Understand the principles of group dynamics.
5. Function more effectively as a member of a group.
6. Ability to use problem solving skills.

Leadership:

The leaders of this group (an applied psychology course) at Menchville High School will be Leslie S. Kaplan, Ed.D. and a Guidance Counselor at Menchville with another colleague. Leaders will have the role of facilitating interaction among participants, to direct the group toward the stated goals.

Course Outline

I. Development of qualities characteristic of a small group
   A. Getting acquainted exercises
   B. Orientation to peer counseling
   C. Development of a supportive atmosphere within the group
   D. Selection and confirmation of personal goals

II. Listening skills (nonverbal)
   A. Awareness of present listening skills
   B. Face and head movements
   C. Hand and arm movements
   D. Body movements
   E. Eye contact

III. Response skills (verbal and nonverbal)

A. Integrating verbal and nonverbal responses (congruence)

B. Paraphrasing

C. Reflection

1. Content

2. Feeling

IV. Helping responses

A. Orientation to learning helpful responses

B. Role playing

C. Exercises in developing helping response skills

D. Exercises in ambivalent feelings

V. Problem solving and decision making skills

A. Recognition of the decision making process used in solving problems

B. Decision making process

1. Define the problem in terms of needs

2. Generating possible solutions

3. Evaluating and testing various solutions

4. Deciding on mutually acceptable solution

5. Implementing solution

6. Evaluation of solution

VI. Group dynamics

A. Development of the functional small group

B. Theoretical concepts of group process

1. Stages of group development

2. Awareness of overt and covert processes within the group

VII. Group activities

A. Introduction of games and exercises appropriate for each stage of group development

B. Principles involved with processing each activity

1. Introduction of activity
2. Instructions
3. Facilitation
4. Processing
5. Closure

VIII. Concepts and experiences

A. Application of skills by role playing

B. Self-evaluation by role playing and employing videotape and audiotape

IX. Application

A. Implementation of small groups led by peer counselors as cofacilitators

B. Continuation of support and resource group composed of peer counselors and trainers daily.